Florin Japanese American Citizens League
Oral History Project

Oral History Interview

with

KOTONO KATO

May 3, 1989
and
May 10, 1989
Sacramento, California

By Mary Tsukamoto

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and
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Japanese american
CITIZENS LEAGUE
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PREFACE

In the summer of 1987, a small group of people from the Florin JACL met at Mary and Al Tsukamoto's home to plan a new project for the organization. Because of the unique history of Florin, we felt that there were special stories that needed to be preserved. The town of Florin, California was once a thriving farming community with a large Japanese American population. The World War II internment of persons of Japanese ancestry living on the west coast, devastated the town and it never recovered. Today there is no town of Florin; it has been merged into the larger county of Sacramento. Many Japanese Americans who reside throughout the United States, however, have their origins from Florin, or have relatives and friends who once had ties to this community. The town may no longer exist, but the spirit of the community continues to survive in people's hearts and memories.

Several hours have been devoted to interviewing former Florin residents. The focus of the interviews was on the forced internment and life in the relocation camps, but our questions touched on other issues. We asked about their immigration to the United States from Japan, pre-war experiences, resettlement after the war and personal philosophies. We also wanted to record the stories of the people left behind. They were friends and neighbors who watched in anguish as the trains transported the community away.

We have conducted these interviews with feelings of urgency. If we are to come away with lessons from this historic tragedy, we must listen to and become acquainted with the people who were there. Many of these historians are in their 70's, 80's and 90's. We are grateful that they were willing to share their experiences and to answer our questions with openness and thoughtfulness.

We owe special thanks to James F. Carlson, former Assistant Dean of American River College and to Jackie Reinier, former Director of the Oral History Program at California State University in Sacramento. Without their enthusiasm, encouragement and expertise, we never could have produced this collection of oral histories. We also wish to acknowledge the project members, volunteers, the Florin JACL which contributed financial support, Sumitomo Bank for their corporate donation, and the Taisho Young Mens Association which contributed some of their assets as they dissolved their corporation on December 31, 1991.

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INTERVIEW HISTORY

Interviewer

Mary T. Tsukamoto, Educator, Historian, Redress Activist
Florin Japanese American Citizens League
Author of We The People: A Story of Internment in America
9132 Doc Bar Court, Elk Grove, California

Interview Time and Place

May 3 and May 10, 1989
South Sacramento Tanoshimikai Luncheon
Sacramento Japanese United Methodist Chapel 7560 Franklin Boulevard, Sacramento, California
Case No. 15, May 18, 1989, Kotono [Yoneda] Kato, 6312 Welty Way, Sacramento, California

Transcribing and Translating

The interview was conducted in Japanese.

Preparation of the Japanese transcript and translation to English was the work of Aileen Nakashima, Member, Florin JACL

Computer Word Processor, Utako Kimura, Member, Florin JACL

Editing

Interviewer Mary Tsukamoto reviewed the transcript on July 6, 1993.

Interviewee Kotono Kato's daughter, Mrs. May Kato Fujii reviewed and retyped the transcript adding information which had been missed in the original interview. Mrs. Fujii returned the retyped transcript the summer of 1993. Mrs. Fujii's address is 7212 Del Prado Way, Sacramento, California. In April 1995, Mrs. Fujii made several changes which were incorporated into the book.

Tapes and Interview Records

Copies of the bound transcript and the tapes will be held by Florin Japanese American Citizens League and in the University Archives at The Library, California State University, Sacramento, 6000 J Street, Sacramento, California 95819.

BIOGRAPHICAL SUMMARY

Kotono Yoneda was born in Kunijahara, Okayama Ken, Japan near Kurashiki, a Cultural Arts Center, on March 3, 1896 to Otsune and Senhachi Yoneda. Kotono's father was a farmer who raised rice, wheat and beans in Kunijahara. She was the second child. Her older brother was Ikazo, then Kotono, her younger sister Mitsuko, and the youngest brother Yorio.

Because her mother, Otsune, was the only daughter, she was cherished and showered with cultural arts education befitting fine girls of her day. She was fortunate in attending a fine Cultural Arts School with outstanding teachers. Kotono often remembered, that might be why she had the innate love for craft art. She attended grammar school, graduating in 1910. Her mother sent her to private sewing classes. Kotono loved flower arrangement classes best.

In 1914, at the age of 18, Kotono braved the unknown, carrying a picture of her future husband, Ihachi Kato whom she had never met and crossed the Pacific [Ocean] to San Francisco as a 'picture bride'. Without love, she married Ihachi in San Francisco on July 5, 1914.

They moved to Healdsburg [near Santa Rosa]. There the shocked young bride found herself picking prunes, struggling in the hot sun, picking smelly tomatoes, cooking over unbelievable primitive facilities, kerosene can cut out to set cooking pots, gathering brush and scrap wood for fire. She cried a lot, was homesick, regretting it all. She wrote her father of her great disappointment and hardship. Her father wrote her to come home! To give up such a harsh life! "But it was not easy to leave."

They next moved to Cloverdale to work on a 120 acre grape ranch. There, not only did she work in the field trying to keep up with the hard working men but had to take off her high heel shoes and dash home to cook for a crew of eight laborers. They always came in to eat before she was ready for their lunch. She cut and nicked her fingers with the clippers as she picked dusty bunches of grape. She had to wash clothes at night after cleaning up the dishes and getting the kitchen ready for the next day's early breakfast chores.

She worked in the hops ranch and worked very hard trying to keep up with all the workers. Before too long, she was pregnant. Her first son, Roy, was born on July 4, 1915. It wasn't too many years before Kotono had May Umeko [Fujii] on February 1, 1917, Helen Toshiko [Yamamoto] on October 8, 1921, and Alfred Satoshi on May 25, 1923. She loved and lost a son, Lee Michiyaki, born on July 27, 1919. Lee died of kidney disease when he was in the Eighth Grade. Lee's school teacher and classmates mourned his death as they tried to console the family on this grave loss. The Kato's also lost their youngest daughter, Satsuki, born in May 1926, after only six months.

Once in 1928 she visited Japan and enjoyed seeing her parents and relatives. When she returned to America, she sent delicious things her father loved. Eventually the family farmed apples in Sebastopol. She taught artificial flower making in winter months.

In 1942, along with 120,000 others, the Kato family was interned in Merced [Assembly Center in California] and were moved to Amache [Internment Camp in Colorado]. At age 46, Kotono, her family and all 120,000 Americans of Japanese ancestry had a terrifying, bewildering, and humiliating three years in internment camps [until 1945].

She is humble as she shares photographs taken during internment in Amache. She became a respected, well-liked instructor in Japanese paper flower making and flower arranging classes. They had successful exhibits and demonstrations.

Because fresh flowers were not available in this barren, isolated, desolate community behind barbed wires, Kotono was asked make artificial flowers and wreaths by desperate bereaved families when their soldier sons were killed in action and wanted to have a funeral for them. Although worried about her own sons, Roy and Alfred in the United States Army, Kotono, with the help of friends and students, fulfilled the orders for crepe paper wreaths. Her husband helped create a frame foundation for the wreath with sagebrush. She was able to offer these lovely wreaths to please the saddened families and friends.

Roy and Alfred Kato eventually returned home safely. She believed that a tiger is said to travel 1,000 miles but always returns 1,000 miles. This was a good luck item Kotono wanted to

give to her sons so they will know her prayers for their safe return would be her ceaseless prayer. She had found an artist friend who painted a miniature tiger on a square piece of silk. She gave Roy and Alfred each this good luck charm. They have it tucked in their wallet to this day. Their army buddies offered to buy the good luck tiger but the Kato boys would not part with it and have it in their possession.

Kotono worked hard, side by side with her husband and she suffered great hardship like many issei women. Ihachi was 85 years old when he went out one day and vanished and no one knows what happened to him. She lived her senior years by sharing her hobby of craft art and learning new ideas for knitting, crocheting and many other creative ventures.

The thing that she is most happy about now age 93 [in 1989] and today 1993 at 97, she is glad, grateful and happy her children and their families are good to her. She lives with her son Roy but all her children are good to her. She feels very fortunate. They all live nearby: Roy Kato, May [Kato] and her husband Richard Fujii, Helen [Kato] and her husband Kaz Yamamoto, and Alfred Kato and his wife Mitsuko. She is a happy, proud widow, grandmother and great grandmother!

October 5, 1993
[Revised April 1995]

Session 1, May 3, 1989

[Begin Tape 1, Side A]

TSUKAMOTO: My name is Mary Tsukamoto. I am going to interview Mrs. Kotono Kato. We are taping this interview on May 3, 1989 for the Florin Japanese American Citizens League [JACL] Oral History Project. Mrs. Kato what is your name.

KATO: My name is Kotono Kato.

TSUKAMOTO: We need information about your family life in Japan and also your experiences in the United States. What year did you arrive in America?

KATO: I came in 1914.

TSUKAMOTO: I was born in 1915.

KATO: My first boy was born in 1915.

TSUKAMOTO: Where did the ship land when you came to America?.

KATO: The ship landed in San Francisco in 1914. Then I went to Healdsburg with my husband, a town near Santa Rosa.

TSUKAMOTO: Did you come by yourself?

KATO: I was a picture bride.

TSUKAMOTO: Oh, a picture bride in 1914! Then you didn't know Mr. Kato?

KATO: I just saw his picture. In Japan, it was that way, love was not considered.

TSUKAMOTO: What was your husband's first name.

KATO: Ihachi Kato.

TSUKAMOTO: How old were you when you came from Japan.

KATO: I was eighteen years old.

TSUKAMOTO: Do you remember anything about Japan? What part of Japan are you from?

KATO: I came from Okayama.

TSUKAMOTO: Did you say Wakayama?

KATO: No, Okayama.

TSUKAMOTO: That's near Kurashiki. I went there when I visited Japan. I went to Kōrakuen, a beautiful place.

KATO: We lived on a farm but every year we made the trip to Kurashiki and enjoyed the beautiful Kōrakuen.

TSUKAMOTO: What were your folks doing for a living?

KATO: They were farmers, raised rice, wheat and beans. We lived on the crop we raised and sold the rest to the market.

TSUKAMOTO: Have you been back to Japan since you came to America?

KATO: I went back to visit in 1928.

TSUKAMOTO: My Grandfather Tsukamoto went to Hiroshima, Japan in 1934.

KATO: I visited with my father and relatives. My younger brother came back from completing his military service that year.

TSUKAMOTO: How many brother and sister did you have?

KATO: Four children in the family.

TSUKAMOTO: Are you the oldest?

KATO: No. I have an older brother, myself, sister, and the younger brother.

TSUKAMOTO: What was your maiden name?

KATO: The last name was Yoneda.

TSUKAMOTO: What was your first name, I forgot.

KATO: My name is Kotono.

TSUKAMOTO: Koto, like the musical instrument koto. What were the names of your brothers and sisters?

KATO: The oldest brother's name is Ikazo; sister's name is Mitsuko, the youngest brother's name is Yorio. My father died at age eighty-six.

TSUKAMOTO: Oh, then he died many years later than your mother.

KATO: After I came back to America, we mailed him delicious things that he liked.

[End Session 1, May 3, 1989]

[Tape 1, Side A]

[Session 2, May 10, 1989]

[Tape 1, Side A]

TSUKAMOTO: This is Mary Tsukamoto talking to Mrs. Kotono Kato. Today is May 10, 1989, and we will continue our oral interview. OK Mrs. Kato, can you tell me about the pictures you brought to the interview?

KATO: We had an exhibition for our artificial flower class in Amache Relocation Camp [Internment Camp in Colorado].

TSUKAMOTO: Did you teach flower making in camp?

KATO: I wasn't very good but I taught flower making class for three years. These are the pictures taken at the exhibition.

TSUKAMOTO: Beautiful pictures.

KATO: The day of the exhibition it was snowing and I didn't think anyone would come out to see our exhibit, however, about 300 people came and we had a very successful exhibition. We had a funeral in camp and since there were no fresh flowers I was asked to make artificial flowers

KATO: for the service. I furnished the supplies and with the help of the students, we made a beautiful floral wreath. Shortly after this funeral, I was asked to make a floral wreath for a serviceman's funeral. It made me sad as I had two boys in the military at the time. However, we made a huge floral wreath for this serviceman's funeral but I don't know if anybody took any pictures.

TSUKAMOTO: Nobody took pictures, that's a shame.

KATO: Mr. Furuya, an artist from Los Angeles, had a booth next to our classroom and he volunteered and made an eagle for the top of the serviceman's floral wreath. I made a streamer from half-inch ribbons of red, white, and blue which was attached to the eagle's mouth. It turned out beautiful. The basic form of the wreath was made by my husband. He gathered some sagebrush and made the foundation for the wreath. Many more funerals were held in the camp but we could not accommodate all of them. However, I remember one occasion when three men came and begged us so many times that one

KATO: of my students said, "Teacher, it's not easy for these men to come and ask you this favor, so please say 'yes.' We will all help, even if it takes all night." A lady student was in the floral business before evacuation and had the material and knowledge. However, another serviceman's funeral was more than I could stand as I had two boys in the service. I didn't want to make any more wreaths but two government representatives came to request a wreath, I finally agreed and kept on making the flowers.

TSUKAMOTO: What were the names of your two boys?

KATO: Roy and Alfred Kato. They both came back after serving in the military. About the time my boys were in the service, a lady from Los Angeles took a large picture of a tiger. There is an old proverb in Japan, "A tiger travels a 1,000 miles but will always come back the 1,000 miles." Tigers are considered to be strong and a lucky omen. She and I decided to make a bunka craft of the tiger, however, we did not have the right color threads. I had the book which my teacher in

KATO: Japan had given me and it showed us how to dye the threads to the color we wanted. We bought the best material they had in camp. My husband made the frame for me. They were still building barracks in Amache so he picked up the scraps and made the frame. I didn't know what to do about the eye of the tiger until I saw a boy playing with some marbles. I bought a black marble from the little boy and my husband cut it in half and I had the eye for the tiger. The picture means a lot to me and I treasure it very much.

TSUKAMOTO: Did your two boys go to Europe?

KATO: My younger son was ready to embark for Europe but at the last minute the order was changed and he was sent to the Japanese Language School in Minnesota [Military Intelligence School, Fort Snelling]. After he graduated the Language School, he was shipped to Japan as a military government interpreter for the construction company. The older boy had a wife and two children and as he did not want to go to the Language School, he was assigned a chauffeur duty at Fort Snelling, Minnesota.

KATO: We were lucky as both the boys came back safely from the military service.

TSUKAMOTO: That was nice. I'm glad you brought all these pictures as we had so many things to talk about. How old were you when you went to camp?

KATO: I was forty-six years old.

TSUKAMOTO: You went to Amache Camp from Florin?

KATO: No, I went to camp from Sebastopol in 1942. First we were sent to Merced Assembly Camp and then to Amache Relocation Camp in Colorado and stayed until 1945. Three years in camp. Here, I have a group picture taken in camp. They wanted me to sit in the front row but I declined.

TSUKAMOTO: You're so humble. Is this picture a <u>bunka</u> craft?

KATO: Yes, it is <u>bunka</u>. You are very observing. When I went back to Japan, I used to go to the hot springs and then I went to visit my flower teacher who lived nearby. Before I left Japan, she gave me a memento, a book on the Art of Flower Making, with her final words,

KATO: "Til we meet again." I still have it and treasure it. My mother was the only girl in her family and she had the privilege of attending the special school which taught her the arts of her time. I must take after my mother as I like all kinds of craft work.

TSUKAMOTO: In Japan, what kind of material did you use to make the flowers?

KATO: In Japan, there's silk paper and all kinds of good paper materials.

TSUKAMOTO: You've learned all this and you were farming. This conversation on the tape will be preserved. The picture you have and all the pretty things you made will be exhibited in San Francisco, especially articles that isseis made.

KATO: The bunka tiger that I made is not in a frame.

TSUKAMOTO: Since you have so many original nice things, you should have an exhibition of your own in Florin.

KATO: No. The bunka is old and torn since I didn't put it in a frame. The foundation material wasn't the best, and it's a shame that I couldn't preserve it. This bunka picture

KATO: shows a tiger under a pine tree with his mouth wide open. The students wanted to make a copy of this picture but I declined as this was special to me.

TSUKAMOTO: It's a shame but since we were in camp you purchased the best material they had.

KATO: I had an artist friend, Mr. Kodani who drew a miniature tiger on a silk material. I sent one to each of my boys in the service for luck. They still carry it in their wallets. Their army buddies wanted to buy it from them but they would not part with it.

TSUKAMOTO: It's getting late so I want to ask you some more question. When did you come from Japan.

KATO: I came in July 1914. The ship landed in San Francisco on the Fourth of July, then I went to live in Healdsburg.

TSUKAMOTO: Where did you go from there and what kind of work did you do?

KATO: My first job in America was picking up prunes. The cooking facilities were very primitive. They did not have a stove, cooking was done on a large kerosene can which had an opening on the top for pots, and brushes were gathered

KATO: for the fuel. We even had to sleep in a tent. I really felt sad and cried to think we had to live like a tramp. Many, many times I wished I had never come to America. I wrote to my father about this and he wrote back telling me to return to Japan, but it wasn't that easy to leave. The next job on that farm was picking tomatoes, but it smelled so bad that I refused to work there. So we went to Cloverdale to work on a 120-acre grape ranch. I had to cook for the eight people in our crew and the cooking facilities were very poor. Men really don't understand and as I didn't know, so I went to work in my dress and high heel. It was a disastrous. I had to take my shoes off, and rush home to cook for the crew. I barely had time to get the food ready before they came home to eat. Mr. Tasaku Hitomi, a school friend from Japan, saw me and greeted me with "You here too." He later opened a men's clothing store in Sacramento. My first venture in the grape field was a disaster, cutting and nicking my fingers with the scissors. My hand was hurting but we had to

KATO: keep doing our daily work. I also worked in the hop ranch where men and women all worked together. My husband wasn't a fast worker so I tried hard to keep up with the crew. I worked in the field, cooked for the crew, and washed clothes at night. It was a hard life, and in the meantime, I found that I was pregnant.

TSUKAMOTO: You sure worked hard.

KATO: I worked hard when I was young but now I'm living in heaven. I had six children, lost two. I'm ninety-four years old now and four of my children live nearby and they are very good to us, I feel very fortunate.

TSUKAMOTO: Who are you living with now?

KATO: I'm living with Roy, my eldest son. Alfred's wife tells me to move in with them as she promised to care for me but I told her I'll stay where I am at this time. So, they decided to let me have my way.

TSUKAMOTO: Is Helen your boy's wife?

KATO: No. She's my daughter, married to Kaz Yamamoto. He likes baseball.

TSUKAMOTO: You have four children: Roy, May, Helen, and Alfred.

KATO: I had another boy, his name was Lee. He had kidney problem

TSUKAMOTO: Was he sick?

KATO: We took him to a specialist in San Francisco but the doctor told us there was no cure for this disease.

TSUKAMOTO: Was this before you went to camp?

KATO: This was way before evacuation. After years of caring for him, he was finally hospitalized when he was in the eighth grade at Sebastopol Grammar School. His teacher wrote to him wishing a speedy recovery and not to worry as he could graduate with his class. My daughter May, read the letter to him which made him very happy. When he died, we put the letter in the casket. Lee had a carving of Mickey Mouse which we gave to the school for a memento. Many of his classmates came to the funeral to pay their last respect. I'm grateful as I still have four healthy children.

TSUKAMOTO: How many children did you have?

KATO: I had six children. A girl child [Satsuki] died in infancy, six months. It wasn't as hard as losing Lee, although I have not forgotten her and I always pray to them. I believe they are looking after me as I'm now enjoying good health.

TSUKAMOTO: You have been blessed by them and have lived a very happy life.

KATO: Everybody is so good to me that I feel guilty.

TSUKAMOTO: Well, you're special, that's why.

KATO: I tell my son Roy, that my husband was a stubborn person and I suffered a lot but now I'm really enjoying my life every day.

TSUKAMOTO: You've had a very fruitful, healthy life.

KATO: I guess I won't die for awhile.

TSUKAMOTO: You lived a long time in America and had a very hard life, cried a lot, but now you are happy.

KATO: I have no regrets or complaints.

TSUKAMOTO: What do you think was the best thing that happened since you came to America?

KATO: Right now, the children are all good to me and I appreciate their kindness.

TSUKAMOTO: That's good. You're lucky that your children are good to you, not all old folks are lucky like you. Many children are working and have no time for the older generation.

KATO: My children are good to me.

TSUKAMOTO: It all depends on the person. Some don't appreciate it. You are really fortunate.

TSUKAMOTO: Tsukamoto's-in-law were really good to me. There's lots of unpleasant things in a family but we must all grin and bear it. You are such an understanding person that you made it into a life of heaven.

KATO: I really feel fortunate.

TSUKAMOTO: Is this all you want to say?

KATO: Yes. Thank you very much.

[End Session 2, May 10, 1989]

[Tape 1, Side A]

NAMES LIST

Florin Japanese American Citizens League
Oral History Project

Interviewee Kotono [Yoneda] Kato

Interviewer Mary T. Tsukamoto

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